

# Ehrlich targets Montgomery to cut costs

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Former Maryland governor Bob Ehrlich is hitting a nerve in voter-rich Montgomery County with cost-cutting proposals seemingly aimed at the county's most treasured and expensive asset: public education.

If elected, Ehrlich says he would ax pension plans for all new government hires and offer a 401(k)-type plan instead because Maryland faces \$18 billion in unfunded pension liabilities. He also said he would gradually shift ballooning teacher pension expenses -- Montgomery's alone cost the state \$125 million last year -- onto counties. He would withhold millions of dollars in extra aid to school systems where education is more expensive -- such as Montgomery and Prince George's counties -- by not funding the Geographic Cost of Education Index.

Ehrlich's proposals are earning kudos from critics who say they are still waiting to hear how Gov. Martin O'Malley plans to shrink the state's projected \$1 billion deficit in fiscal 2012.

But Ehrlich's plans raise a question: Why would he take aim at Montgomery -- where pollsters say the Republican must win at least 38 percent of the vote to have a chance at beating O'Malley on Nov. 2?

As one of the largest and most densely populated counties in Maryland, Montgomery is a key benefactor in the education formulas that divvy up state aid. Ehrlich's proposals would put at least \$125 million in teacher pension funding in jeopardy and eliminate \$31 million in education aid.

Ehrlich also has maintained strong opposition to the Purple Line

as a light-rail system, supported by most Montgomery residents.

"Ehrlich has really hurt himself in Montgomery," said Donald F. Norris, chairman of the Department of Public Policy at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County. "Any chance that he had of getting any substantially greater vote out of Montgomery has been washed."

Teachers unions are baffled by his proposals.

"I don't think it's a well-thought-out strategy," Montgomery County Education Association President Doug Prouty said. "It's just energizing the Democratic base in Montgomery."

Prouty said government salaries are too meager to attract talented workers without a hefty pension plan included.

And cutting education funding could disable Maryland from meeting federal

Race to the Top mandates, said Debra Garner, spokeswoman for Maryland State Education Association.

But politics professor Todd Eberly commended Ehrlich for at least

offering cost-cutting measures -- a political risk he said O'Malley was foregoing.

"Everyone on the planet has realized [defined benefit pension plans] don't work," said Eberly, an assistant professor at St. Mary's College of Maryland. "O'Malley is portraying [Ehrlich] as a tool of lobbyists and big corporations, but when it comes to standing up to the unions, [O'Malley] refuses to."

Defined benefits plans have become archaic in the private sector as many employers have switched to the 401(k). Only 10 percent of private-sector employees have pension plans, compared with 85 percent of public employees.